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## Diagnosis 'not good': reef irreversibly damaged

Jessica Marszalek and Gabrielle Dunlevy | October 9, 2008 - 4:29AM

Farmers may face tougher regulations after a report found agricultural run-off was killing the Great Barrier Reef, with some sections already irreversibly damaged.

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh yesterday released a report into the water quality of the reef in 2007, saying the diagnosis was "not good".

According to the report, 6.6 million tonnes of sediment had been discharged into the reef - four times higher than estimated pre-European settlement levels.

Despite financial incentives for farmers to improve land management, 16,600 tonnes of nitrogen and 4180 tonnes of phosphorous was flushed into the reef.

Ms Bligh said the state government had spent \$25 million a year to protect the reef since a joint state and federal Reef Water Quality Action Plan was launched in 2003.

Following a meeting with federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett on Monday, state cabinet had agreed to give the plan "more grunt", with a revised intergovernmental agreement ahead of a significant revision of the reef plan, she said.

"The reality is the reef will die if we do not act," she said.

To help determine funding priorities, a joint commonwealth and state reef

summit will be held in Brisbane later this month, bringing together environmentalists and scientists.

Ms Bligh said the summit would look at whether tough mandatory regulations were needed to make farmers improve their land management practices.

"We are already seeing irreparable damage to our reef so the time to act is now," she said.

"... this material leaves us no choice and if it means taking some hard decisions then we'll take them." She said the effects of urban populations, mining, tourism and other sectors on the reef would also be looked into to protect what was an important environmental and multi-billion dollar tourism asset.

The WWF supported regulations to stop outdated farm practices.

"We have known for years the reef's water quality breaches national water guidelines and the time for action is overdue," WWF spokesman Nick Heath said.

"Real leadership is required on this issue and I hope the premier is serious about preserving the reef for future generations.

"She has said the reef is at risk of dying, so she must act quickly and decisively to stop this from happening."

Ms Bligh said the government would want to move on the ideas of the summit "as quickly as possible".

Mr Garrett, in response to the Queensland government report, said the federal government was aware of the significant issues facing the Great Barrier Reef.

Australians could have confidence that the federal government was getting on with the job of looking after the reef and making sure its natural and economic value was protected, he said.

"We have specifically committed \$200 million to reef rescue, knowing that we need to provide additional resources, additional investment and additional effort to safeguard (the reef)," he told reporters in Hobart.

Queensland Farmers Federation chief executive officer John Cherry said there had been a 20 per cent cut in use of fertilisers in the past five years, which had a significant impact on the health of the reef.

"I will be speaking at the summit and the points I will be saying is that the state government has to put money where its mouth is and invest in incentives for farmers to improve their practices," Mr Cherry said.

"It has to be there in terms of its monitoring ... so the best information is coming back to farmers and what impact it's having on the reef.

"At the end of the day, they've got to realise that they have to deliver a win-win outcome for farm productivity as well as sustainability."

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